

Dust of the Zulu: Ngoma Aesthetics after Apartheid [book review]

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Abstract:

Just as a *ngoma* performer prepares an audience in voice and motion of the competitive comradery that is at the core of this art form, Meintjes places herself in a performative space in her poetic two-page preface. Punctuating each paragraph with the first person, Meintjes reminds readers "I write," "I listen," "I hear," "I notice," "I register," "I approach." She also contextualizes her first book, *Sound of Africa: Making Music in a South African Studio* (Duke University Press, 2003), as one moment of studio work drawn from the broader context covered in *Dust of the Zulu*.

Keywords: book review | *ngoma* | aesthetics | post-Apartheid

Article:

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***Dust of the Zulu: Ngoma Aesthetics after Apartheid.* By Louise Meintjes.**

Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017. Pp. 388; 74 b/w illus. (including sets of film stills), notes, references, index. \$94.95/£79 cloth, \$26.95/ £21.99 paper.

Just as a *ngoma* performer prepares an audience in voice and motion of the competitive comradeship that is at the core of this art form, Meintjes places herself in a performative space in her poetic two-page preface. Punctuating each paragraph with the first person, Meintjes reminds readers “I write,” “I listen,” “I hear,” “I notice,” “I register,” “I approach.” She also contextualizes her first book, *Sound of Africa: Making Music in a South African Studio* (Duke University Press, 2003), as one moment of studio work drawn from the broader context covered in *Dust of the Zulu*.

In a gesture worthwhile of emulation, Meintjes begins her acknowledgements in isiZulu, thanking not only *ngoma* performers, but also families and communities. Her emphasis on the layered connotations of language is maintained, both in isiZulu and English, throughout the book. IsiZulu words and phrases are attended to carefully, but not in a stiflingly analytic manner. Selected moments of oratory are translated and annotated, while other accounts are treated more rapidly and the energy of Meintjes’ writing leaves translations behind. As she herself states, “my text shifts in register from the evocative to the explanatory, the terse to the detailed, and the mimetic to the analytic” (p. 19). As an isiZulu-fluent reader, I found the tone and dynamism of her descriptions to be palpable and evocative of aural memories. Even those unfamiliar with the rise and fall of isiZulu will come to understand the tones and voice qualities that are critical components of *ngoma* performance.

Meintjes takes the time to describe key Zulu aesthetic principles in a manner that allows isiZulu words to become a part of each reader’s vocabulary. *Isigqi*, a term connoting control at the edge, is fleshed out through Meintjes’ descriptions and embedded in the complexity of interpersonal relationships (p. 64). Utilizing praise names and biographical details, we come to know Dudu, Mboneni, Zabiwe, Siyazi, and other masterful performers. At times, the use of various isiZulu names and valences displaces power structures that would typically dominate in an academic monograph. For instance, the dance aesthetics of Sikeyi’s performances are embedded within thick descriptions of esiPongweni troop competitions. We temporarily forget that Sikeyi is an isiZulu name for the white, world-music icon Johnny Clegg. Meintjes embeds this industry heavyweight within isiZulu aesthetics first, so that later contextualization of his scholarly research, career, and relationship to esiPongweni is approached through the perspective of those in rural KwaZulu-Natal, rather than the inverse.

When it comes to the aesthetics of the body and masculinities the author attends to unfolding temporal interactions, be they nuanced exchanges in single dance performance or traces of decades-long relationships. Concerted attention on the part of the reader must be maintained to place events in a chronology. However, through repetition we gain insight into Meintjes’ own subjective location in the ethnography. It is clear that specific performances and individuals are iconic in Meintjes’ perceptions of *ngoma*. She is at once an insider and outsider to the world of masculine performance. Toward the end of this monograph readers learn how this art form has become a lens for the nostalgia of many

wealthy expatriate investors, politicians, and reality television developers. This contextualization, which might have been an introduction in a lesser author's hands, is woven into a later chapter and reminds us of the importance of Zulu warrior tropes in South Africa and in the construction of blackness worldwide. The commodity value and political utility of *ngoma* performance is contextualized, but does not dominate Meintjes' narrative.

In her most objective valences, Meintjes returns to key historical events and political contextualizations. She traces the boundary disputes in KwaZulu-Natal, pivotal anti-Apartheid concerts in the UK, and shifts in the world-music scene that directly influenced the biographies of her main protagonists. But Meintjes consistently returns to her focus on musical and physical *ngoma* performances, public interactions, and recording sessions that took place from the 1990s to the 2010s. We travel with Meintjes as she recounts individual narratives of Zulu men maintaining dignity amidst wavering stability in wage-labor, health, and the inconsistent machinations of the international music industry. The humanity, fragility, and mutual constitution of strength through aesthetics is expertly handled in this new classic in the genre of performative ethnography.

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***African Miracle, African Mirage: Transnational Politics and the Paradox of Modernization in Ivory Coast.* By Abu B. Bamba. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2016. \$34.95 paper.**

African Miracle, African Mirage: Transnational Politics and the Paradox of Modernization in Ivory Coast seeks to offer a corrective to the standard explanation of the Ivory Coast's development. In particular, the book debunks the singular emphasis that has been placed on France's role in the modernization of the country. The book focuses on the Ivorian "Thirty Glorious Years," the period of unparalleled growth that spans the country's postwar economic boom, from the 1950s to the early 1980s. Bamba argues that, during this period there were significant struggles between American and French visions of decolonization, modernization, and development. By rescuing the hidden history of the American-French competition over who would influence the Ivory Coast, Bamba hopes to reveal what has been obscured: France's weaknesses and the Ivorian elite's strengths. In particular, Bamba seeks to show how "Ivorian leaders wittily contested the hegemony of Paris by appealing to the United States to become involved in targeted areas of the Ivorian politics of development" (p. 10). Accordingly, the book's objectives are twofold: to unearth Ivorian leaders' agency that has generally been overlooked, and to reveal the fact that France's paternalism was more attenuated than is often recognized.

The book is well researched and offers a number of interesting nuggets and intriguing insights. Yet, it falls a bit short of its overall objectives. Bamba provides some evidence that the United States posed a threat to French hegemonic interests. However, at the same